

A Blurb on Bulbs: Fall Bulb Selection and Planting

September is here, and as the growing season begins winding down, planning for spring gardening begins.

Put bulb planting on the “fall to-do” list and you’ll thank yourself in a few short months when the daffodils are smiling back at you!

But bulbs do not begin and end with the friendly daffodil. Surprisingly, the dizzying array of bulb plants will have you rethinking that walkway border, that bare spot in the perennial garden, that fenceline - and wondering - why haven’t you done this sooner?

Learning bit more about bulbs might help...so let’s start with the basics.

What is a bulb, anyway?

A true bulb is actually a modified plant stem, consisting of a bud and fleshy leaf layers that function as a food storage structure during dormancy or drought. But there are other structures loosely referred to as “bulbs” in the gardening world that really are not.

What kinds of bulbs or bulb structures are available?

So for the purposes of this article, although botanically inaccurate, we’ll refer to “bulblike structures” as “bulbs”. If you’re curious about these specialized wonders (they really are!), here are some quick definitions and familiar examples:

True bulbs: Common, teardrop-shaped form, some with a “tunic”, a papery sleeve that keeps the bulb from drying out. Layered in the inside, growing point on top, flat root structure on bottom. **Examples:** **Daffodils, tulips, hyacinths.**

Corms: Similar to a true bulb in shape, but structurally different as not layered on the inside (as an onion). **Examples:** **Crocus, gladiolus.**

Tubers: Potatoes are tubers - enlarged stem tissue structure with growing points called “eyes”. **Other examples:** **Cyclamen, tuberous begonias.**

Tuberous roots: The specialized, enlarged root structures provide food storage and are joined to the stem. **Examples:** **Sweet potatoes, dahlias, daylilies.**

Rhizomes: Modified stems that enlarge, running horizontally just above or below the soil. **Examples:** **Iris, ginger, canna.**

When do I plant?

Spring and early summer bloomers (January to May) require a chilling period prior to bloom time, so are planted in the fall. Summer and fall bloomers (June to September) are planted in the spring. Of the summer and fall bloomers, tender bulb varieties cannot overwinter in the ground, so must be dug and stored until the following spring. Cold hardy varieties can be left if well mulched.

Where should I plant bulbs?

Bulbs require well drained soil to prevent rotting, ideally with worked-in organic material and a balanced slow-release fertilizer. A location with full sun to part shade is optimal. Idea: planting spring bulbs under deciduous trees allows full sun during blooming time, until the tree canopy leafs out and the bulbs go into dormancy. Read on for additional planting strategies!

How do I select the best bulbs?

When selecting bulbs, bigger is better - more stored energy yield better blooms and foliage. Some of the smaller varieties just aren't that large, so get the biggest ones available. Avoid lightweight, moldy, shriveled or soft bulbs, and make sure when purchasing that you have more than enough to cover your targeted area...because sparse plantings will certainly make for a disappointing display.

How do I plant bulbs?

Start with a good tool...a trowel may be good enough for a handful of bulbs in a small area. But if your project is larger, I would recommend a bulb trowel, an auger attachment to a drill, or a long-handled tool to save your lower back. If planting in a larger area, excavate to depth, place the bulbs, and cover the entire area carefully with soil.

True bulbs are planted "pointy side up" - the growing point up, root plate down - for the best results. For other bulblike structures, determining the growing point may be more difficult...but don't despair. When in doubt, plant it sideways, and the bud will figure it out!

Planting depth is often 3 to 4 times the width of the bulb. Smaller bulbs can be planted closer together, 2 to 3 inches, while the larger bulbs spaced 4 to 6 inches apart. Water in well and mulch.

Bulb-Planting Strategies

Don't just plant a handful of yellow tulips in a single row...follow some of these suggestions for more exciting results:

Naturalization: Toss the bulbs...and plant where they land!

No-Row: Plant in drifts and groupings rather than rows.

Rock 'n Roll: Mix bulbs with rolling flowering times for a continuous display.

Mix 'n Mingle: Plant among ornamental grasses or perennials that will hide withered foliage after bloom time.

Layered Looks: Bulbs can be layered in the same site, larger bulbs beneath, with a layer of soil between the smaller ones above.

Anything else?

Aftercare is very important, so deadhead after blooming, but don't remove the foliage until it browns. Green foliage stores energy for next year's blooms. Fertilize opposite bloom time (fertilize in fall for spring, and in spring for summer/fall bloomers), in line with soil test recommendations.

Don't let another fall get away from you without planting some bulbs...create a new border, tuck in a few under a lonely tree, fill in empty spaces in your perennial bed or naturalize in a large open area needing some attention. And wait for spring...it'll be here before you know it!

Reference: [Bulbs: Tulsa Master Gardeners](#)